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THE ESKIMOS, INDIANS AND ALEUTS OF ALASKA

Alaska is still the last frontier in the minds of many Americans. Interest in the "Great Land" has increased sharply since Alaska became a full fledged state in 1958. In spite of this great interest many Americans know very little about the people of the largest state in the Union. This is especially true of the Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts who live in the remote regions. This pamphlet has been prepared in an effort to help others know and understand the original settlers of Alaska.

At the time of the discovery of Alaska in 1741 by Vitus Bering, the Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts were well distributed throughout the area. Although there is still some disagreement among anthropologists concerning the origin of the American Indians and Eskimos, the great majority believe that these people migrated across the Bering Strait from Asia. Apparently this migration occurred in successive waves over thousands of years. The northern Eskimo group appears to be the most recent emigrants and have settled along the coast of the Arctic Ocean from Little Diomed Island to Greenland.

In Alaska the Eskimo, Indian and Aleut people lived within well defined regions and there was little mixing of ethnic groups. As in any culture the way of life was dictated by the abundance of food. In Southeastern Alaska the salmon, deer and other plentiful foods permitted the Thlingits, Tsimpshians and Haidas to settle in permanent villages and develop a culture rich in art. The Athapaskan Indians of the Alaskan Interior, on the other hand, became wanderers following the migrating caribou herds and taking advantage of seasonal abundance of fish, waterfowl and other game. The Eskimo people, like the Thlingits, depended upon the sea for life. However a more hostile climate and fewer resources required a far different way of living.

There are fundamental differences between the Native or Eskimo and Indian way of life and the non-Native way. A person born in the Native culture is oriented to the present. He learns to live in harmony with nature and economically survives by consuming the products of the land and the sea. A person born in the non-Native culture is usually in better economic circumstances. He survives by making the land and the sea work and produce, and the culture is pointed to the future. The impact of 20th Century culture has brought great changes among all of the Native peoples, some good and some unfortunate. As a result, some Eskimo and Indian people still live much as their ancestors lived while others have adjusted to the non-Native culture. To understand some of the problems faced by present day Indian and Eskimo people it is necessary to know something of their past.

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SOUTHEASTERN ALASKA - INDIANS

The three Southeastern tribes, living in and around the Alexander Archipelago from Ketchikan to Katalla, found many abundant natural foods. The shellfish, salmon, seal, berries, deer, black and brown bear, furnished food which permitted a relatively easy life. There are no mythological starvation stories among these people. Food was abundant enough so that these groups were able to live in permanent villages. The climate is warm in winter and cool in summer with precipitation from 50 to 200 inches. The terrain is characterized by rugged mountains, torrential rivers, craggy coasts and dense forests. There are few flatlands and the region is poorly suited for agriculture.

The Tsimpsians

These people were originally of British Columbia, migrating in 1887 to Annette Island which was given to them by the United States Congress. A modern, model village was built under the leadership of Father Williams Duncan, an Anglican minister. Now living in Metlakatla on Annette Island (just south of Ketchikan) are 900 Tsimpsians. They live a partly cooperative life running a salmon cannery, 4 fish traps, a water system, and a hydro-electric plant. Individually they own fishing boats and operate scores in the village. A large commercial landing field serving jet planes operates under lease on the island. Like all Southeastern people they are primarily fishermen. They are well integrated into the life of the state and take part in the social, economic, and political life of the region.

The Haidas

At the south end of Prince of Wales Island is the village of Hydaburg with a population of 250. These are relatively recent immigrants (1700s) from Canada. (Many Haidas live on Queen Charlotte Islands and are Canadian citizens.) There is a relationship between the Thlingits and the Haidas. Their languages are similar in the way that English and German are similar. Tradition states that totem carving originated among the Haidas, and it is generally conceded that they excelled in this art. The Thlingits sometimes hired and sometimes enslaved Haida totem carvers to take advantage of their skills in adorning their own homes and villages. The Haidas are also noted for their fine slate carvings and the precise and delicate working of articles of wood, bone and shell. Like the Thlingits, the Haidas are grouped into two phratries of brotherhoods and marry into the opposite phratry. They lived in times past on the fish from the sea, the seal, berries, deer and black bear.

The village of Hydaburg is fairly modern with substantial frame houses. A cooperative salmon cannery, financed by the Federal government, is run by the Hydaburg Cooperative Association. Individually, many of them are successful operators of power fishing boats, which they both build and use, and they take a lively interest in the life of the state.

The Thlingits

The Thlingit Indians of Southeastern Alaska are also relatively recent immigrants from Canada. However, they were well distributed when the first European contact was made in Southeast Alaska. Their folklore contains many stories of how they crossed mountains and glaciers on their way to the Sea. Their villages are scattered from Ketchikan to Katalla, and each village is a part of the complicated social structure which characterizes the Thlingits. They reached every high level of culture, comparable to that of the Iroquois, second to those of the Aztecs and Incas, although agriculture was not a part of their lives.

The social structure resulted in all Thlingits belonging to one of two phratries, the Ravens or the Eagles. All marriages were between people of opposite phratries. In addition, each phratry was broken down into numerous clans, named for characteristic animals, which are the individual totems of the clan - the Wolf, Bear, Cohoe, Killerwhale, etc.

The Thlingits were and are commercially minded. They dominated the Interior Canadian Indians, indulging in sharp trade practices with them and referring to them contemptuously as "our money". From them they secured furs - beaver, marten, ermine, fox, muskrat - and offered in trade eulachan oil, copper pieces called "tinneh", and Chilkat blankets.

The ceremonial blanket of the Thlingits, perfected by the Chilkats of Klukwan, is one of the most beautiful products of these gifted people. In great demand as an article of trade, it carried enormous prestige. The blanket was primarily intended as an adjunct to festivals and solemn occasions such as betrothals, weddings and funerals. After the coming of the missionaries changed the funeral customs from cremation to burial, it became customary for every high caste person to be buried in a Chilkat blanket.

The blanket design was carved on a pattern board by the man of the family and then painted by him. Usually these blanket boards were of imported yellow cedar. One half of the design was depicted, with the center figure given in full, the halves of the design corresponding. Each clan house had its own design and all blankets from that house were similar. Designs then varied from clan to clan, and they frequently illustrated a story or part of a story. One finds the Bear, the Salmon, and other totems singly and in combination. Colors and designs alike were symbolic of the clans represented. Black was the color of Raven and yellow symbolized the Eagle. In fact, the Thlingit word for yellow is "Eagle-claw color". It generally took about a year to complete a blanket if all materials were at hand. Much of the culture of the Thlingits is related to the production and use of the Chilkat blanket.

Both Haidas and Thlingits were part of the totem culture that has attracted so much attention from all visitors to Alaska. These decorated poles were in general histories or records of the outstanding events in the life of a family or a clan. The clans usually took their names from

some of the well-known animals of the region - for example the raven, eagle, wolf, frog - and these are among the animals represented on the totem poles. In short, the totem poles were a sort of coat of arms which carried a definite historical record. Unfortunately, some missionaries and teachers, under the mistaken impression that the totem poles represented idols to be worshipped, induced the Indians in some communities to destroy these real works of art. Most of the Indians, however, were too independent to be thus regulated, and many well carved specimens are still standing. The larger totem poles are seldom manufactured today. Small totem poles, however, patterned after the designs of the larger originals, are still whittled out by Indian wood carvers and are commonly available for sale to tourists.

In addition, the Southeastern Alaska Indians carved and painted the fronts of their houses with elaborate designs and made wooden bowls and other beautiful carvings in bone, horn or wood. They made many baskets, mainly from spruce root and grass fibers, nearly all of which were ornamented.

INTERIOR ALASKA - INDIANS

Wide river valleys, rimmed with high mountains, are the home of the Athapaskan Indians of Alaska. Birch and black spruce grow along the rivers - the Yukon, the Kuskokwim, the Koyukuk, the Porcupine, the Tanana and many others. This is a land of short warm summers and long cold winters when the temperature often plunges to 40 and 50 degrees below zero.

Before the advent of the white people, the Interior Alaskans were nomadic, following the moose and caribou, and there were no permanent villages. They developed no agriculture. Theirs was purely a hunting economy. When the game was plentiful, they thrived and when the game was scarce, the people starved. True, they were and are somewhat dependent on the river fish, especially the salmon, but the latter are not too plentiful, in spite of the fish wheels and other methods of catching them. The Interior people were always oil-hungry. Oil, particularly seal oil from the Eskimos and eulachan oil from the Tlingits, was consistently a sought after item of trade. Rich and valuable furs found their way to the coasts from the Interior, having been bartered for oil.

The Alaskan Athapaskan Indians are the Northern Athapaskans. The Southern Athapaskans are the Navajos, Apaches and Hupai, who are closely related to their northern cousins. The Alaskans, so far as is known, lived formerly in Canada and were driven into Alaska by the warlike Crees, possibly 700 or 800 years ago. All the Athapaskans have a similar language. In Alaska, those from as far south and west as Iliamna can soon understand the people of Fort Yukon in the north and east. The similarity seems to be about that of Dutch and German. These Athapaskans extended from Kachemak Bay on Cook Inlet at Seldovia, up the Kenai Peninsula to the Copper River and on to the Canadian border - also from Lake Iliamna, Lake Clark, the upper Kuskokwim above Sleetmute, on the Yukon at Holy Cross, south of the Brooks Range, to the border.

SOUTHWESTERN ALASKA - ALEUTS

On the Alaska Peninsula, eastward to the Ugashik River on the north and to Pavlof Bay on the south, extending on down the Aleutian Chain and nearby islands, the Aleuts lived - a branch of the Eskimos. (Pronounced Al-ee-oot) In this area the winters are somewhat colder than in South-eastern Alaska and the summers are cool. The average July temperature is 57 degrees and the average January temperature is 15 degrees. There is less precipitation, some 40 inches of rain and some fog. The few trees are mainly Aleutian brush, alder and some aspens.

There were good natural resources for the life of primitive man. Salmon migrated to the rivers, shellfish abounded on the shore, sea mammals swam in the sea and on the land there were berries. Caribou and bears wandered in the lowlands and mountain sheep and goats were found on the higher mountains. The Aleutian Islands are on the main north-south flyway for migrating seabirds and the Aleuts benefited richly from them. The people lived in permanent villages. A sea-hunting culture was well developed but was surpassed by the northern Eskimos.

The finest basketry produced in Alaska, if not in the world, was formerly made by the Aleut women of Attu Island. They were particularly skillful and painstaking, and fortunate too in having a type of grass on Attu Island better adapted for basket weaving than the grass that grows farther eastward in the Chain. The younger generation has not carried on the fine basket weaving of their ancestors, although some baskets are still made in the Aleutian Islands.

The original Aleutian house was a large communal structure up to 240 feet long and 40 feet wide. From 10 to 40 families, sometimes as many as 150 people, lived in one house. Sunk to a considerable depth in the ground and covered with a layer of sod, the houses appeared to be wholly underground. The early Russians, in fact, usually referred to them as "caves". Walls and roof supports consisted of upright driftwood timbers and sometimes whale bones. The roof was made of poles or planks covered with a layer of dry grass and over that a layer of sod. The houses were entered through small openings in the roof by means of notched logs used as ladders. The smaller houses had two or three entrances of this kind, the larger ones, five or six. Each family had its separate living quarters, partitioned off by stakes and grass mats. There were no fire-places in the houses. Heat and light were provided by oil burning lamps. A later Aleutian house or barabara was a single family dwelling, partly underground and covered with sod, much smaller than the old communal house. The entrance was at the side instead of through the roof.

Men and women wore a long shirtlike garment resembling the Eskimo parka but without a hood. Those of the men were made from the skins of puffins, cormorants, guillemots or murre; the women's were made of sea otter or seal skins. Little children's parkas were sometimes made of downy young eagle skins.

The men wore a peculiar kind of hunting helmet, made from a flat piece of wood which had been scraped very thin, steamed and bent over and sewed together at the back. It was conical in shape with the front elongated to project over the eyes. These hunting hats were elaborately decorated with painted designs, bone and ivory carvings and sea lion whiskers strung with glass beads.

The men cut their hair short on the top of the head. The women cut theirs in front so as to hang over the forehead, tying the rest into a knot at the top. The women's faces were tattooed and both sexes wore stone or ivory labrets in the lower lip and a variety of other ornaments in the nose and ears - bone pins, beads, small stones, feathers.

The Aleuts were very skillful sea hunters. In their single or double-hatched light skin boats they made long coastal voyages and often ventured far from shore in pursuit of sea otters, seals, sea lions, and even whales occasionally. Their weapons were light darts and spears cast with the throwing board.

Today the Aleuts live in well constructed frame houses. The majority are members of the Russian Orthodox Church. They fish commercially, many of them going to Bristol Bay to fish for the summer. Others work in canneries, cod fish or operate boats. During the war many of them were highly successful military scouts and they are often guides to expeditions at the present time. They will apply themselves to learning a new process until they master it, whether it is running a gas engine or a typewriter. The Aleuts are noted for their clean way of living and their interest in good homes and clothing. Good family people, they enjoy their children and insist on educating them.

There are approximately 5,700 Aleuts. The language is related to the Eskimo but far removed from it, although the grammatical processes are the same. The Aleuts are divided into two groups speaking slightly different dialects: the Unalaskans of the west end of the Alaska Peninsula, the Shumagin and Fox Islands; the Atkans inhabiting the Andreanof, Rat and Near Islands. When the Russians reached the Aleutian Islands in the 1740s practically every island was inhabited but now only a few islands have permanent Aleut settlements. There are very few fullbloods among the modern Aleuts, as might be expected after 200 years of contact with Europeans.

Two colonies of Aleuts which had been established on the Pribilof Islands by the Russians to provide labor for sealing operations have been well cared for by the United States Government, for whom they work in handling the seal herd. They have good homes, clothing well suited to the region and many of them are fairly prosperous. Owing to the threat of Japanese landings on the Pribilofs and Aleutian Islands, the people were removed from the islands in the winter of 1941-42 and temporarily quartered in Southeastern Alaska. Many of them have since returned to their native islands. The Attu people, however, settled mostly in Atka and today there is no Aleut village on Attu Island.

WESTERN AND NORTHERN COASTS OF ALASKA - ESKIMOS

The Bering Sea and Arctic coastlines, the habitat of the Eskimos of Alaska, is as harsh an area for human life as the planet has to offer. Windy, treeless wastes where temperatures are well below zero in winter, and hardly more than 50 degrees in the short cold summer, present what seems to be an almost unsurmountable challenge to the ingenuity of man. Yet it was just this area that produced the remarkable culture that flourished about 2,000 years ago, as exemplified by the discovery of the Stone Age remains in the Point Hope peninsula.

These people must have had artistic ability to have left such a wealth of material behind them. Moreover, they must have had ample time to cultivate both their ability and the resources they exploited to the fullest extent. At Point Hope, hunting implements of stone, jade, bone and ivory have been found, as well as other articles which were plainly intended for use in war. A vigorous people, they scoured the land and the sea in their activities.

These prehistoric peoples were succeeded by the Eskimos who were here when the Russians first discovered them in the middle of the 18th century. Living along the coast in permanent villages, the Eskimos found the salmon reasonably plentiful, some berries, great flocks of ducks, geese and other shorebirds, as well as numerous ptarmigan and a few wandering caribou. They would have scarcely survived, however, had they not been able to develop their sea and ice-hunting to a marvelous degree. In this they were unsurpassed. With only the harpoon, in sturdy craft made of driftwood covered with skin, these people secured the 60 ton bowhead whale. Whales, seals and walrus were the mainstay of their economy. Clothing was made entirely of skins from reindeer, ground squirrel, eider duck, cormorant and murre.

Trees in these coastal areas are rare. There are some straggling stands of spruce on the Seward Peninsula, as well as up the Kobuk and Noatak Rivers, but the usual vegetation is confined to small alders and willows. Driftwood likewise is not plentiful and is highly prized, both for construction of kayaks, and in ancient times the framework of the semi-subterranean homes which were then covered with sod, except for a skylight of gut. Alaskan Eskimos did not build snow igloos as did the Canadian Eskimos.

The reindeer were introduced from Siberia at the suggestion of the Presbyterian missionary, Sheldon Jackson, at the turn of the century. Lapp herders also came with the reindeer and many of them settled and intermarried with the Eskimo. Reindeer round-ups still take place. Every part of the animal is used - for food, clothing, skin-thread, rawhide. The parka, an outer garment, is made like a large shirt or poncho and has an attached hood worn over the head or thrown back on the shoulders.

The kayak is a one-hole, seaworthy skin canoe from 10 to 20 feet long and about 2 feet wide. It is made of seal or walrus skin tightly stretched over a framework of wood or bone, decked over except for the round hole in the middle in which the occupant sits. It is propelled by a double-bladed paddle.

The umiak, also built of seal or walrus hides cunningly stitched so there is no leak, and without a deck, is large enough to carry several passengers and considerable freight. It is a sturdy craft and can be readily pulled up over the ice or shelving beach. An outboard motor is a frequent present day adjunct.

Many Alaskan Eskimo villages today have well constructed frame houses sometimes heated by oil. The school is the center of activity - education, civic, social. The Eskimo people enjoy being together and they have community dances and songs - rock and roll as well as Eskimo dances. They like festivities and stories, and the rhythms of the small skin tambourine which they call their Eskimo drum. Visiting goes on at all times and often radios (usually battery sets) and phonographs are going full blast. The Eskimo Scout Battalions of the National Guard are an important part of village life, and where there are armories, these also serve as community buildings.

Eskimos possess uncommon strength and endurance, but they sometimes push their luck too far and many a case of frosted lungs has ended in tuberculosis. Immersion in the seawater, when dogsleds go through the sea-ice, has resulted in pneumonia and death. These people are generally of small stature, with round heads, small and well-formed hands and feet, broad faces and somewhat Oriental cast of feature. The men hunt and do some fur trapping, while all the household duties fall to the lot of the women. They must cook, make and mend clothing, repair kayaks and umiaks, pitch tents in summer, dry fish and meat and store them for winter. Ivory carving of a high degree of excellence is found in some villages. The Kobuk villages are now exploiting jade for jewelry, formerly an article of trade and used for arrow, spear and harpoon heads, and scrapers.

Of the total population of about 43,000 Eskimos and Indians, about 22,800 are Eskimos, 5,700 Aleuts, and 14,500 Indians. They live in widely separated villages which are scattered along the 25,000 mile coastline and the great rivers of Alaska. The village, varying in population from 30 to 1,000, is the unit rather than the tribe. In Alaska there are no tribal organizations or tribal enrolments such as are found in the "lower 48". The Alaska tribe denotes the language group, not the nation. (Such as Haida.)

Alaskan Eskimos and Indians are citizens of the United States and of Alaska, having been naturalized collectively by the Citizenship Act

of June 2, 1924. They are not wards of the government, though the Federal government does perform functions designed to meet their special needs. They are no longer a primitive people though many do hunt and fish for part of their food. Others are airplane pilots, welders, mechanics, carpenters, storekeepers, teachers, office workers, and State senators and representatives.

Where electricity is available many Eskimo and Indian homes today have electrical appliances, especially among the Southeastern Indians. Oil is used extensively for heat. In remote northern sections with building materials scarce and freight high, houses are often built of driftwood and salvaged material. Mail order jackets vie with hand made fur parkas, but the fur mukluks surpass boots and shoepacks.

Alaska has few connecting roads. Transportation is by boat and plane in the southeast; by dogsled and plane in winter and boat and plane in summer, in the north and west. Short wave battery radios fill in when there is no commercial telegraph or telephone service, but White Alice has extended these services to many remote areas.

Role of Bureau of Indian Affairs

The responsibility for meeting the needs of the Native peoples of Alaska is that of the State and the Federal agencies which serve all of the state's citizens. It is recognized, however, that all the needs of the Native peoples cannot be met at this time, so the Bureau of Indian Affairs continues to exercise an important role in Alaska.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs is seeking attainment of these objectives: (1) maximum Native economic self-sufficiency, (2) full participation of Native peoples in American life, and (3) equal citizenship privileges and responsibilities for Native peoples. The Bureau will apply to Native villages and areas the same programs of resources development, improved credit, industrial development, vocational training, and employment assistance that have proved helpful in other under-developed areas both within our country and overseas.

Sources of Information (but no material for general distribution):

State Museum and Library, Box 2051, Juneau, Alaska
Anthropology Dept., University of Alaska, College, Alaska
Arctic Health Research Center, USPHS, Box 960, Anchorage, Alaska
U.S. Govt. Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C. - Price List No. 60
Books:

HISTORY OF ALASKA	also NATIVE RACES OF PACIFIC STATES by H.H. Bancroft
ALASKA 1741-1953 by C.C. Hulley	ALASKA NOW by Herb Hilscher
THLINGIT INDIANS by Aurel Krause	ALASKA NATIVES by Anderson & Eels
INDIANS OF NW COAST by P. Drucker	ART OF NW COAST INDIANS by R.B. Inverarity
ESKIMO HOMES by Emily I. Brown	ESKIMO VILLAGE IN MODERN WORLD by Hughes
ALASKA IN TRANSITION by Geo. Rogers	ALASKA, THE LAND & PEOPLE by Futler-Dale
GEOGRAPHY & GEOLOGY OF ALASKA by A.H. Brooks	
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	George Rogers and Richard Cooley

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